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**Chapter One**

“Muriel!” I exclaimed. “What a lovely surprise. Come on in.”

 I gestured for the Little Dipperton postmistress to step inside out of the sun. Even though it wasn’t quite ten in the morning, it promised to be another hot day.

 Muriel’s face was red. She was perspiring heavily in a black cotton dress and clutching a canvas shopping bag.

 I spotted an old bicycle propped against the wall outside.

 “I hope you didn’t cycle in this heat,” I said as I let her pass by and into the coolness of the West Gatehouse, the new home of Kat’s Collectibles & Valuation Services.

 Muriel looked miserable, which was hardly surprising. Her husband of nearly fifty years had died of a heart attack just two weeks before. Like many married couples in the village whose family had lived there for generations, they had known each other from birth.

 Muriel took in the interior of the eighteenth-century gatehouse. It was one of an identical pair that flanked the main entrance to the Honeychurch Hall estate. The dowager countess, Lady Edith Honeychurch, had rented both out to me so I could set up my new business.

 Cardboard boxes of stock ranging from antique dolls and bears to a variety of enameled boxes and Tunbridgeware, Tiffany lamps and Art Deco decorative objects, were stacked haphazardly along one wall.

 “It’s smaller than I expected.” Muriel wrinkled her nose. “Paint.”

 “Yes. I just finished decorating.”

 The gatehouse consisted of one large living area, one and a half stories high with a gabled ceiling and two tiny dormer windows. At one point there had been a mezzanine level with a ladder that led up to a sleeping area, but the floorboards had been rotten and Edith agreed that I could take them out. A modernized galley kitchen and bathroom had been tacked on the rear back in the 1970s—judging by the décor. I planned on redoing both when I could afford it.

 The place was light and airy with three bay windows that looked on to the driveway. I loved it. “It’s perfect for me.”

 “Of course, Albert Jones used to live here. He was the gatekeeper before the Great War,” Muriel went on. “His brother …” She paused, then frowned. “No, I can’t remember his name. He lived in the other one. They were a strange lot. There was this scandal—”

 “I’m using the East Gatehouse for storage at the moment,” I said, stopping Muriel’s notorious penchant for gossip in mid-flow. “I’m just waiting for shelves and display cabinets to be installed in this gatehouse and then I’ll really be in business.”

 Muriel cocked her head. “You’re not going to get many customers coming all the way up here, though, are you? You’re a bit off the beaten track.”

 “I don’t expect to,” I said. “It’s by appointment only.” But Muriel had hit a nerve. My original dream of Mum and me owning an antique shop in London had ended the minute she impulsively bought the Carriage House here on the Honeychurch Hall estate. I had moved past all that now and was just determined to make things work in my new life. Besides, I had fallen in love with Honeychurch Hall and the Devonshire countryside and seeing my mother so happy, made me happy, too.

 Gesturing to a red damask-covered Knole sofa, I said, “Take a seat. I’ll make you a cup of tea, unless you’d prefer some of Mrs. Cropper’s homemade lemonade?”

 Muriel pulled a face. “Peggy makes it too tart. Tea will do nicely.”

 As I busied myself in the galley kitchen I wondered why Muriel had come—and, by bicycle. Although the village of Little Dipperton was less than a mile and a half from the Hall, the lanes were narrow, flanked by tall hedge banks and full of hairpin bends—very dangerous to cyclists and pedestrians alike.

 I brought tea in on a tray along with a plate of McVitie’s chocolate digestive biscuits.

 “What is wrong with your car?” I had grown used to seeing Muriel zipping around the country roads in her brand-new canary-yellow Kia.

 “It was stolen,” she said bluntly.

 I was surprised. “From the *village*?”

 “No. Dartmouth. In the car park at Tesco’s,” said Muriel. “Last Friday.”

 “But that’s terrible.”
 “And what with my Fred being gone…oh, Kat,” she wailed. “I don’t think I can carry on.” She looked so utterly forlorn that I slipped beside her and took her hand in mine.

 “It must be so hard to lose Fred,” I said gently. “I know I miss my dad. You should talk to my mother about the first few weeks and how difficult it was for her.”

 She nodded and retrieved a lace handkerchief from a concealed pocket to dab at her eyes.

 “Thank you, dear. You’re very kind.” Muriel gave a heavy sigh. “Forty-nine years married and never a cross word said.”

 Somehow I doubted that. Many a time I’d heard Muriel complain that Fred spent too much time up at the Hare & Hounds pub and at the Newton Abbot racetrack.

 “It probably hasn’t sunk in yet,” I said. “It must feel surreal.”

 “It’s real enough, but it looks like your father made sure Iris was well provided for, which is more than I can say for Fred. I keep looking out of my bedroom window, expecting to see him working out there in the churchyard. It was the stress of the court case that did him in, you know, but we had to do it.”

 “It’s tough, I know.”

 “Fred was my life. He was a good husband.”

 Muriel’s comments echoed my mother’s about my father. Much as I had adored Dad, he had been very controlling, and yet, as we passed the one-year milestone of his death, he seemed to have evolved into a saint.

 “But you should be careful. I’ve had a bout of shoplifting in the general store—just bits, sweeties and chocolate—that kind of thing,” said Muriel, promptly changing the subject. “And what with the upcoming Skirmish and that dangerous criminal on the run—”

 “Skirmish?”

 “That’s what we locals call the re-enactment,” said Muriel. “There were a series of skirmishes before the siege at Honeychurch Hall during the English Civil War.”

 “Ah, I didn’t realize,” I said.

 “The old earl started the tradition—before my time of course. You’ve got the Roundheads and the Cavaliers—that’ll be the Royalists, as we prefer to call them in these parts. They’ll be setting up camp right outside your back door. You’ll have a lot of strangers milling about for three whole days.”

 “Maybe I’ll get some new customers,” I said lightly.

 ‘I hope you’ve got an alarm.” She pointed to the windows. “And curtains. You’re very exposed, and with all these strangers—”

 “I’ll be careful,” I said. “Did you want me to value something for you today?” Over the past few weeks, I had had a slew of antique armor and weaponry to value or sell that someone had discovered in a cellar or attic. Most were reproductions.

 “Oh no.” Muriel opened her canvas bag and handed me a jar. “I brought you some homemade strawberry jam from Fred’s last batch.

 I was touched. “That’s very kind. I love strawberry jam. Thank you.”

 We fell into an uncomfortable silence. I could sense that Muriel wanted to tell me something by the way she was playing with her lace handkerchief, but she seemed to be reluctant to speak. It also occurred to me that it was a Thursday morning and she should have been manning the post office. “Is everything alright?”

 “I wanted to ask a favor, but it must be in confidence,” she began. “I don’t want anybody else knowing my personal business.”

 As she was *the* village busybody, I thought Muriel’s comment ironic. “Of course not.”

 “I think his lordship is going to evict me.”

 “What?” I exclaimed. “Why?”
 “A Jarvis has run the post office since 1828. A Jarvis has mown the churchyard since the Gunpowder Plot. A Jarvis—”

 “The post office belongs to the Honeychurch estate?” I knew that most of the cottages in the small village of Little Dipperton were tenant occupied, but I hadn’t thought the post office and general store were as well.

 “Every cottage with a blue door belongs to the Honeychurches,” said Muriel.

 “But why would Rupert evict you?” I said again. “Who would run the post office? Are you thinking of retiring?”
 “Fred handled all the money,” she said. “He died so suddenly and well … he didn’t leave a Will. I don’t understand things like probate.” She started to cry softly into her lace handkerchief.

 “Do you have a solicitor?”

 Muriel nodded.

 “Then don’t worry,” I said. “Let him sort it out for you.”

 “But I can’t afford to pay his fee or my rent until he does.”

 “I’m sure Rupert—his lordship—would understand if you talked to him,” I said.

 “No. You don’t know him like I do.” Muriel shook her head. “You see him very differently from us in the village.”

 “What does Violet say?”

 Muriel scowled. “We’ve fallen out.”

 “I thought you were best friends!”

 Muriel snorted with contempt. “I don’t want to talk about it. It’s enough having to read about it in the papers.”

 Too late I remembered the sordid details of their disagreement over the “catastrophic pruning” of Violet’s climbing roses that had made the front page in the *Dipperton Deal.*

 There was another uncomfortable silence. I just didn’t know what to say. “You mentioned a favor?”

 “I want you to lend me some money,” Muriel blurted out. “Not much. Just a little.”

 My heart sank. Dad had been a tax inspector and I knew exactly what he would have said on the matter. He would quote Polonius from Hamlet, “*Neither a borrower nor lender be,*” and I totally agreed with him.

 “It’s just for a couple of weeks,” Muriel said quickly. “Just to tide me over.”

 I knew for a fact that probate—especially when there was no Will—often took months.

 “We can’t have a post office with no electricity,” Muriel went on. “Not that we’ve been cut off. Yet. My niece Bethany is holding the fort whilst I’m here. I’m training her up to take over—unless his lordship kicks me out.”

 “I know Bethany,” I said. “She’s smart.”

 Muriel just sat there wearing a beaten-puppy expression. “I don’t know who else to ask.”

 It was excruciatingly awkward. I hesitated. “How much do you need?”

 “A thousand pounds.”

 “A *thousand* pounds?”

 “It’s not as if you’d miss it.” Muriel gestured to my stock. “Look at all that stuff. Just a limb from one of those dolls would fetch five hundred.”

 “That’s hardly t-t-true,” I stammered.

 “And you were on the Telly for years,” she said. “Everyone knows people on the Telly get paid millions of pounds.”

 I was so shocked at Muriel’s nerve that it took me a minute to speak. “I don’t know what gave you that idea,” I said, forcing a smile. “I’m sorry. I can’t at the moment.” Or ever, I wanted to add but held my tongue.

 “Oh. Then I’ll be living on the streets.” Muriel slumped into the sofa. “Even a hundred pounds would help.”

 I knew I was going to regret it, but I felt completely pushed into a corner. Without saying a word, I went over to my desk and withdrew my checkbook from the drawer. “I am willing to *give* you—not lend you, Muriel—three hundred pounds and that’s all I can do.”

 “That’s very kind,” Muriel whispered. “I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t desperate.”

 “But there is one condition.”

 Muriel regarded me with suspicion.

 “You must promise to talk to Rupert this afternoon and tell him what you just told me. Is that fair?”

 “Alright,” she said grudgingly.

 I handed Muriel the check feeling a mass of conflicting emotions—mostly resentment. Things with my new venture had been much slower than I had anticipated, and although I did have some savings, I couldn’t really afford to throw away three hundred pounds.

 Muriel got to her feet. “I’d better be going.”

 “Did you want me to run you home?” For some reason my resentment made me feel guilty. “We could put your bicycle in the back of my Golf?”

 “No thank you. I really like riding my bicycle,” said Muriel. “I hope you enjoy Fred’s jam.”

 As I saw her to the door, Muriel paused. “Dartmouth Antique Emporium is a good idea. You’ll get lots of tourists coming through.”

 And with that, she waved a cheerful good-bye and left.

 As I watched her mount her old-fashioned bicycle and put the canvas bag in the pannier, I thought of two things. First of all, that jam was the most expensive jam I had ever bought. And second, how did Muriel know that I’d been looking at renting a temporary space in Dartmouth for the summer? I hadn’t even mentioned it to my mother.

 At that moment my mobile rang. The caller I.D. read: “Mum.”
 “Hello. Speak of the devil—”

 “You must come quickly!”

 “Are you alright?” Not another drama, I thought. “You sound agitated.”

 “Eric Pugsley and I are in Cromwell Meadows—”

 “You’re with *Eric*?” Willingly?” This was a first. Mum’s relationship with her neighbor and his “disgusting” scrapyard had always been rocky. With its pyramid of tires, discarded pieces of farm machinery and the many “end-of-life” vehicles in various stages of decay that littered the far end of the field I couldn’t say I blamed her. It really was an eyesore. Fortunately, the view was only noticeable from Mum’s upstairs office.

 “Now, before you jump to conclusions, Katherine, I want to make it clear that this had nothing to do with me.”

 A familiar sense of dread began to pool in the pit of my stomach. “Do I have to sit down to hear this?”

 “Of course not. It’s so exciting,” Mum trilled. “Eric’s dug up a body.”